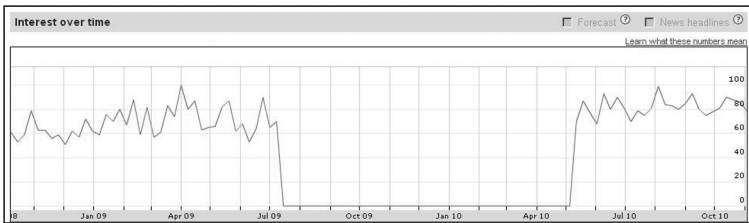


## INTRODUCTION

This project started with an image. No, it wasn't the famed image of the “tank man” staring down a column of armored vehicles outside Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Nor was it an image of any specific dissident act or a photo of protesters. In fact, this image wasn't meant to be artistic at all. But in the stark way it communicates its contents, one might even call it poetic.



The above graph shows the volume of online search activity, as tracked by Google, originating from the northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang.<sup>1</sup> While it may not be as vivid as the tank man photo, the above figure certainly conveys a different, powerful

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1. You can generate this graph yourself: [www.google.com/trends/explore#q=a&geo=CN-65&date=10/2008%2025m&cmpt=q](http://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=a&geo=CN-65&date=10/2008%2025m&cmpt=q). If you're skeptical of Google's data, you can replicate similar results of a large gap in search activity in Xinjiang using China's largest search engine, Baidu: [index.baidu.com/main/word.php?type=1&area=926&time=200901-201101&word=q](http://index.baidu.com/main/word.php?type=1&area=926&time=200901-201101&word=q). Thank you to Pierre F. Landry for introducing me to this graph.

message; even someone without any knowledge of how the Internet works can look at this chart and conclude, “Looks like somebody turned something off.” And indeed, for roughly ten months, from July 2009 to May 2010, web access was essentially shut down in the entire province of Xinjiang after rioting and protests erupted there.<sup>2</sup> The graph lays bare the ability of a government to control what was thought to be uncontrollable: the Internet.

Inspired by this graph and by the impressive attempts of *China Digital Times*’s website to track banned words across various Chinese online services,<sup>3</sup> I concocted a scheme to systematically uncover as many blocked words as I could on Sina Weibo, China’s most important social media website. I designed a computer script to use 700,000 Chinese Wikipedia titles<sup>4</sup> as search terms on Weibo to see what would happen. For three months, the script performed searches on Weibo and recorded whether any of the terms were reported to be censored. I’ve collected and annotated more than 150 of those banned terms in this book. In hypothesizing about why they might be blocked, *Blocked on Weibo* is designed to offer an engaging and informative introduction to Chinese history, culture, and politics as well as a way to think about issues of media, censorship, and democracy in a fast-changing technological world. What

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2. According to state media, in late June 2009, a Chinese Han factory worker (Han being the majority ethnic group in China) in Shaohuan City, Guangdong Province, falsely alleged that six Uyghur men had raped a woman. Commentators surmised that the antagonism might have arisen from the perception that Uyghurs, who mostly hail from the province of Xinjiang, thousands of miles away, are stealing local jobs by working for lower wages. Whatever the reason, a bloody fight along ethnic lines took place in and around the toy factory, with at least two Uyghur men killed. Demonstrations demanding a full investigation into their deaths were planned in the capital city of Ürümqi in their home province in Xinjiang, and violent confrontations broke out between protesters and police on July 5. Who triggered the violence and whether the protest was organized by overseas Uyghur separatist groups (as Chinese authorities claim) are disputed matters. Thousands took to the streets, several hundred people were killed, and hundreds were detained. Among the government reactions to prevent further spread of the protests and to hinder organizers was to cut off cell phone service and Internet access in the region.

3. “敏感词库,” *China Digital Times*, accessed December 17, 2012, [chinadigitaltimes.net/space/敏感词库](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/敏感词库).

4. You can download them for yourself here: [dumps.wikimedia.org/zhwiki](http://dumps.wikimedia.org/zhwiki).

this book does not provide is a scathing critique of China's Internet policies, a position I feel is better left to those who are more directly connected to, more knowledgeable of, and more affected by the situation, and I hope readers don't automatically assume this book is a rant against China. Rather, *Blocked on Weibo* shares an affinity with the mission statement of the now defunct *Tunnel*, an underground mainland Chinese electronic magazine, which once wrote,

Instead of indulging in the talk of noble causes and great aspirations, it is a better idea to quietly and patiently study the details of the technology. If we have turned our inaugural statement into a technical manual, it is because we are trying to practice this idea. It may be easier for us to approach our shared dream of freedom and democracy through the sideways of technical details than the public square of seething emotions.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, by impartially examining these various censored keywords, we may perhaps see more clearly the sorts of challenges facing Chinese officials, companies, and Internet users as they confront and utilize social media. If nothing else, you'll get a little Chinese history lesson from each word's explanation.

Weibo is run by a private company, Sina, which is legally responsible for the content that users upload to the website. Weibo (微博)<sup>6</sup> is a general term for microblogging—literally, “tiny blog”—representing a whole host of Twitter-like websites in China. However, Weibo has become synonymous with the most active microblogging site, Sina Weibo. Sina wasn't the first company to launch a weibo service in China, but it is by far the most significant such site in China today. The site is not just a virtual playground for people to share jokes and photos<sup>7</sup> of their pets with

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5. Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 92.

6. Weibo (*Wēibó* in pinyin) is pronounced “way-baw” (“baw” as in the word “bawl”).

7. A 2011 analysis from HP Labs showed that Weibo users had a propensity for sharing jokes and images, especially via retweets (that is, by reposting another user's original message to their own microblog). Louis Yu, Sitaram Asur, and Bernardo A. Huberman, “What Trends in Chinese Social Media,” 5th SNA-KDD Workshop '11, August 21, 2011.

stuffed animals,<sup>8</sup> but also an avenue used to organize protests and share grievances.<sup>9</sup>

Weibo may have started as a Twitter clone, and for Western readers unfamiliar with the service it's still probably simplest to talk about it as such. But in recent years, Weibo has developed a number of features that Twitter doesn't have, including semi-threaded comments, events, polls, games, Facebook-like apps, instant messaging, and community portals. Aided by China's banning of Twitter and the addition of these attractive features, Sina Weibo has become the undisputed first source for real-time information in China, with over 350 million registered accounts. Whenever I refer to Weibo in this book, I am referring to Sina's weibo service (as opposed to its primary competitor, Tencent, and Tencent's weibo site). Chinese websites are required by law to monitor themselves and remove any material that is deemed offensive by the government. Sina Weibo is allowed in China, whereas Facebook and Twitter are not, because Sina, like all major Chinese Internet websites, is willing to censor the site's content.

The websites can do this in a number of ways, including deleting individual posts—a manpower-intensive task that both infuriates and exasperates users. In many ways, one of the easiest and most flexible ways to censor the flow of information on a site, however, is to block users from searching for specific terms. In addition to returning zero results for these sensitive keywords, Weibo notes when it has in fact blocked your search, helpfully displaying an error message: “根据相关法律法规和政策, [the blocked keyword] 搜索结果未予显示” (“According to relevant laws, regulations and policies, search results for [the blocked keyword] cannot be displayed”). Thus, one is aware when search results are blocked, unlike other instances when the so-called Great Firewall and Golden Shield may leave a user ignorant that his connection and searches are being filtered or degraded.

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8. 最爱摆弄家 (hotvote), “小动物本尊和他们毛线绒的可爱分身,” Sina Weibo, October 25, 2012, [weibo.com/1851825901/z29CSHKTy](http://weibo.com/1851825901/z29CSHKTy).

9. Rachel Lu, “Dramatic Photos—NIMBY Protest Turns Bloody in Western China,” *Tea Leaf Nation*, July 3, 2012, [www.tealeafnation.com/2012/07/dramatic-photos-nimby-protest-turns-bloody-in-western-china](http://www.tealeafnation.com/2012/07/dramatic-photos-nimby-protest-turns-bloody-in-western-china).



*Blocked on Weibo* documents these sensitive words and posits why each one might be censored. However, this book is not a definitive list of words banned in China; it is merely what one website—albeit the most important social media website in China—does not allow its users to search for on its site. The hope with this project is to make clear that censorship in China is a complex and nuanced issue,<sup>10</sup> and in each entry I try to provide the proper context to explain why a word might be singled out for censorship. Sometimes the reason seems to be historical; sometimes it is very contemporary. Sometimes I’m just plain mystified. Though some of these sensitive words were no doubt ordered to be placed on Weibo’s blacklist by government officials, many others are here due to self-censorship

10. China, like any country, has its flaws, but one can’t merely reduce the issue of censorship, online culture, and Chinese culture described in this book to “Hey, look at those crazy Chinese.” And in China’s defense, based on the political upheaval and social turmoil taking place all across the world, especially in developing nations, it may have a legitimate case for wanting to control its transition to a more open society (if that is indeed the goal). Can it continue to do so in the heavy-handed manner that it does so today? Probably not. But automatically to declare any Internet regulation evil without considering IRL (“in real life”) politics and social issues is unfair to the countries that have to grapple with such complicated issues.

on the part of Sina.<sup>11</sup> Rather than risk a government reprimand for accidentally letting offensive material slip through, the company overcensors, blocking even seemingly innocent keywords.

The noted political scientist Gary King says that research into China's online censorship "exposes an extraordinarily rich source of information about the Chinese government's interests, intentions, and goals—a subject of long-standing interest to the scholarly and policy communities."<sup>12</sup> This book tries to do something similar: by tracking the various words blocked on Weibo, we might be able to get a general sense of what is considered a sensitive topic to Chinese authorities and achieve a more nuanced understanding of the politics at play in Chinese social media—and society—today.<sup>13</sup>

Over the past decade, many smart people have taken up this task—looking into how and what exactly China censors on the Internet—among them David Bamman and his colleagues at

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11. Though seemingly oxymoronic, the self-censorship is indeed "enforced," that is, companies are held accountable if their quasi-voluntary regulatory efforts do not meet the Chinese Communist Party's strict (but vague) standards; for instance, Tencent's and Sina's commenting features on their weibo sites were disabled in the aftermath of the Bo Xilai scandal in March 2012. Xinhua, China's official news agency, quoted an unnamed State Internet Information Office spokesman who confirmed the shutdown was a punishment: "The SIIO spokesman also said with regard to a number of rumors having appeared on weibo.com [Sina Weibo] and t.qq.com [Tencent Weibo], the two popular microblogging sites have been 'criticized and punished accordingly' by Internet information administration authorities in Beijing and Guangdong respectively" ("China's Major Microblogs Suspend Comment Function to 'Clean Up Rumors,'" Xinhua, March 31, 2012, [news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-03/31/c\\_131500416.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-03/31/c_131500416.htm)).

12. Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review*, in press, [gking.harvard.edu/gking/publications/how-censorship-china-allows-government-criticism-silences-collective-expression](http://gking.harvard.edu/gking/publications/how-censorship-china-allows-government-criticism-silences-collective-expression).

13. David Bamman and his colleagues confirmed that they could identify the sensitive words that caused certain messages to be deleted at much higher rates than typical. Those sensitive words were found to be blocked on Weibo's search engine at a much higher rate as well, verifying that a link exists between this "hard" censorship (the search blocks that Weibo tells the user about) and "soft" censorship (the posts that are covertly deleted), both of which are connected to these sensitive terms.

Carnegie Mellon University,<sup>14</sup> the developers of Weiboscope<sup>15</sup> and other researchers at the University of Hong Kong,<sup>16</sup> Jedidiah R. Crandall at the University of New Mexico,<sup>17</sup> Xiao Qiang and *China Digital Times*,<sup>18</sup> Martin Johnson and GreatFire.org, Jonathan Zittrain and his colleagues at Harvard's Berkman Center,<sup>19</sup> the aforementioned Gary King, and many others, and I have often extrapolated from their insights. But, of course, any conclusions I reach may well be off base, and all errors are my own.<sup>20</sup>

Out of the roughly 700,000 terms I searched, I came up with more than 1,000 blocked keywords, roughly 500 of which were

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14. David Bamman, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah A. Smith, "Censorship and Deletion Practices in Chinese Social Media," *First Monday*, March 5, 2012, [firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3943/3169](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3943/3169).

15. King-wa Fu, CH Chan, and Michael Chau, "Assessing Censorship on Microblogs in China," *IEEE Internet Computing*, February 11, 2013, [doi.ieeecomputersociety.org/10.1109/MIC.2013.28](http://doi.ieeecomputersociety.org/10.1109/MIC.2013.28).

16. Cedric Sam, YY Chan, David Bandurski, and King-wa Fu, "A Fully Automated Method to Catch and Characterize Deleted Posts on Sina and Tencent Weibo," YouTube, presented May 21, 2012, at 10th Annual Chinese Internet Research Conference at University of Southern California, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzZyteOnlKc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzZyteOnlKc).

17. Jedidiah Crandall, Daniel Zinn, Michael Byrd, Earl Barr, and Rich East, "ConceptDoppler, a Weather Tracker for Internet," 14th ACM Conference on Computer and Communications Security, November 2007, [www.csd.uoc.gr/~hy558/papers/conceptdoppler.pdf](http://www.csd.uoc.gr/~hy558/papers/conceptdoppler.pdf); Jong Chun Park and Jedidiah R. Crandall, "Empirical Study of a National-Scale Distributed Intrusion Detection System: Backbone-Level Filtering of HTML Responses in China," International Conference on Distributed Computing Systems, June 2010, [www.cs.unm.edu/~crandall/icdcs2010.pdf](http://www.cs.unm.edu/~crandall/icdcs2010.pdf); Tao Zhu, David Phipps, Adam Pridgen, Jedidiah R. Crandall, and Dan S. Wallach, "The Velocity of Censorship: High-Fidelity Detection of Microblog Post Deletions," arXiv.org, March 4, 2013, [arxiv.org/abs/1303.0597](http://arxiv.org/abs/1303.0597).

18. "新浪微博搜索敏感词列表 (更新中) Sensitive Sina Weibo Search Terms (Updating)," *China Digital Times*, Google Docs, accessed December 17, 2012, [docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Aqe87wrWj9w\\_dFpJWjZoM19BNkFfV2JrWSlpMEtYcEE#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0Aqe87wrWj9w_dFpJWjZoM19BNkFfV2JrWSlpMEtYcEE#gid=0).

19. Jonathan Zittrain and Benjamin Edelman, "Empirical Analysis of Internet Filtering in China," Berkman Center for Internet & Society, March 20, 2003, [cyber.law.harvard.edu/filtering/china](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/filtering/china).

20. If you have your own reasoned conjectures or spot a mistake in my entries, feel free to contact me on Twitter @jasonqng or via my website: [blockedonweibo.com](http://blockedonweibo.com).

unique. Of those 500 unique blocked words, I've selected over 150 terms, which cover a range of topics and moments in Chinese history, and organized them thematically in the book. The largest share of the blocked words are names of people, the majority of whom are Communist Party members—protection from criticism on Weibo seems to be a perk for rising up the ranks—while dissidents and people caught up in scandals or crimes make up the rest of the names. Some of the other words I uncovered are equally unsurprising—for instance, political terms such as 六四 (64, short for June 4, 1989, the day of the crackdown in Tiananmen Square; see student leader, page 152) and 反共 (anti-Communism; see Communist dog, page 198). Others, such as 乱伦 (incest, page 83), 暴露狂 (exhibitionism; see dew point, page 74), and 吹箫 (blowing a flute, slang for blow job; see one-night stand, page 66), spoke to social mores and topics that were sensitive for prurient reasons. A few terms, such as 伊斯兰 (Islam, page 190) and 同性恋 (homosexuality; see lesbian, page 81), were surprising in their reactionary nature. And finally, some words, such as 黄色 (yellow, slang for something pornographic; see rare beauty, page 69, note 8), seemed to border on the ridiculous<sup>21</sup>—until one comes to understand the context and the subsurface significance of the word. When I say “banned” or “censored” on Weibo in this book, I generally mean that the word is “blocked” in the search function of the site. Users can post just about anything they want to the site. But many words subsequently yield no results when they are searched for, such as 温家宝 (Wen Jiabao, the former premier of China, see page 92). Some other sites primarily rely on filters that will deny users the ability to post a message if they use a banned word—a practice that Weibo also employs, to a lesser extent.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, successfully posting a message doesn't necessarily mean it can be read and shared. At times, if a post contains a sensitive word, it might be rendered invisible to others even though you

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21. Mercifully, yellow has been unblocked since February 2012.

22. For instance, trying to post a message with the word Bloomberg (see page 206) or Wen Jiabao will return this message: 抱歉, 此内容违反了《新浪微博社区管理规定(试行)》或相关法规政策... (Sorry, this content violates “Sina Weibo's Community Guidelines” or related regulations and policies . . .).



can see it on your own timeline.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Weibo's censors can also summarily delete inflammatory messages without any notice.<sup>24</sup> However, the censors are not infallible, and it is possible for posts with banned words to escape the censor's eye—so long as they don't gain too much attention or advocate collective action,<sup>25</sup> or perhaps if they're cleverly embedded inside images or obscured in coded language (see *Combining Cyrillic Millions*, page 42). Blocking a user's ability to find a term makes it impossible to look for sensitive content, and the censors don't have to delete or filter posts one at a time. Not only is this method more flexible, it's less intrusive. Users might feel outraged if they were faced with an error message when posting their own content, but being unable to find results for a term probably just elicits a shrug. And words that are only temporarily sensitive can be added to the blacklist of search terms one day and removed the next without having had to delete the underlying content.<sup>26</sup> So when censors decide a certain search term is no longer sensitive, as they have done for hundreds

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23. For instance, for several months in 2012, any post with the word 遊行 (march, see page 135) would cause your post to be disappeared. The Beijing blogger Jason Ng (no relation) documented these vanishing posts and the myriad other ways that Weibo censors in a 2011 post: Jason Ng, “新浪微博给我印象最深刻的10件事,” 可能吧 (*Kenengba*), September 12, 2011, [www.kenengba.com/post/3019.html](http://www.kenengba.com/post/3019.html). You can read an English summary at: Steven Millward, “8 Ways That Sina Weibo Will Shut You Up, or Shut You Down,” *Tech in Asia*, September 12, 2011, [www.techinasia.com/sina-weibo-deleted-banned-blocked](http://www.techinasia.com/sina-weibo-deleted-banned-blocked).

24. Paul Marks, “Revealed: How China Censors Its Social Networks,” *New Scientist*, March 8, 2012, [www.newscientist.com/article/dn21553-revealed-how-china-censors-its-social-networks.html](http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn21553-revealed-how-china-censors-its-social-networks.html).

25. The Gary King article referenced earlier argues that, contrary to popular wisdom, censors allow users to criticize the government online but treat topics that concern potential collective action—demonstrations, protests, petitions, etc.—with widespread deletions, even if the individual post supports the government. The breadth of data collected and new computer-assisted techniques they employ are awe-inspiring, but with regards to this book, their paper concerns only the deletions of posts—not the monitoring of search blocks—and did not encompass Weibo and microblog posts, which they deem to be too short for the content analysis performed with their techniques. Thus, their rigorous conclusions may not be totally applicable to the type of censorship discussed in this book.

26. Charles Custer, “Strange Censorship on Sina Weibo: Bug or Conspiracy?” *Tech in*

of words such as 恋足 (foot fetish; see page 76) and 九一一袭击 (the 9/11 attacks; see page 168) in late January 2012, the switch is flipped and users can suddenly search for foot fetish posts to their hearts' content—so long as they haven't been intimidated by the chilling effects of the previous block.

"Transparency" comes in the form of a notice posted when content is blocked—the same policy promoted by Twitter as a check against censorship.<sup>27</sup> While transparency is generally laudable, it could be argued that these reminders of censorship serve as a form of intimidation, a caution that your Internet activities are being monitored—much as cartoon police figures have been prominently displayed on numerous Chinese websites in recent years.<sup>28</sup> In a way, the search blocks condition users to recognize the limits of acceptable discourse, and even when the limitations are taken away later, the residual effect of the censorship can remain. Such "transparency" serves as an effective training mechanism, thus furthering the goal of decentralizing the censorship and moving the onus for it from the government to the media company and, finally, to the individual.

At the moment, Weibo's search-filtering mechanism is not particularly sophisticated (though post deletions—the so-called soft censorship that takes place behind the scenes without the user ever being aware of it—are relatively more nuanced). The search-filtering mechanism checks the keyword against a blacklist, and if any part of the search term matches any word on the blacklist, the term is blocked. For example, "Nintendo 64" is blocked because "64" is short for June 4, the day of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. Thus, any search containing "64" will be blocked, even harmless ones like "Nintendo 64."<sup>29</sup> This is an issue known as the Scunthorpe Problem, so named because the denizens of Scunthorpe, England,

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*Asia*, February 8, 2012, [www.penn-olson.com/2012/02/08/strange-censorship-on-sina-weibo-bug-or-conspiracy](http://www.penn-olson.com/2012/02/08/strange-censorship-on-sina-weibo-bug-or-conspiracy).

27. "Tweets Still Must Flow," *Twitter Blog*, January 26, 2012, [blog.twitter.com/2012/01/tweets-still-must-flow.html](http://blog.twitter.com/2012/01/tweets-still-must-flow.html).

28. Sami Ben Gharbia, "Chinese Cartoon Cops Patrolling Websites," *Global Voices Advocacy*, August 29, 2007, [globalvoicesonline.org/2007/08/29/chinese-cartoon-cops-patrolling-the-web](http://globalvoicesonline.org/2007/08/29/chinese-cartoon-cops-patrolling-the-web).

29. The number 64 has since been unblocked on Weibo ([en.greatfire.org/s.weibo.com](http://en.greatfire.org/s.weibo.com)

were prevented from signing up for AOL in 1996 because the word “cunt,” part of the city’s name, was censored.<sup>30</sup>

Over the years, in a series of cat-and-mouse games, Chinese Internet users have developed an extensive series of puns—both visual and homophonous—slang, acronyms, memes, and images to skirt restrictions and censors.<sup>31</sup> Such creative usages may still be helpful in evading the censor’s eye on Weibo—using a code makes one’s post both less likely to get caught in any automatic search filter, and less likely to be found by a human censor later on. Furthermore, Chinese Internet users have mastered the use of irony as protest, reaching the point where emphatically pro-government comments online such as “Socialism is good”<sup>32</sup> and “I have been represented by my local official”<sup>33</sup> are often meant to be satirical. Filtering tools including the ones Weibo uses in its search engine certainly can’t recognize such subtleties. In some respects, the filters are “easy” to defeat, emphasizing just how important those human monitors employed by Weibo are. They have the ability to delete individual posts and even entire accounts, which is what happened to the account of Ai Weiwei, the dissident artist.<sup>34</sup>

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/weibo/64). This is a reminder that to check the latest status of whether a word is still blocked or not, one can reference the list at the end of the book, go to <http://s.weibo.com> and search for it, or go to [GreatFire.org](http://GreatFire.org) and test there.

30. “Surfing the Net in Bonny Sconny,” *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph*, April 9, 1996. Accessible via David G. Bell, “Computer Underground Digest,” ed. Jim Thomas, April 11, 1996, [cu-digest.org/CUDS8/cud829](http://cu-digest.org/CUDS8/cud829).

31. “Glossary,” chinaSMACK, accessed December 17, 2012, [www.chinasmack.com/glossary](http://www.chinasmack.com/glossary).

32. Eric Abrahamson, “Irony Is Good! How Mao Killed Chinese Humor . . . and How the Internet Is Slowly Bringing It Back Again,” *Foreign Policy*, January 12, 2011, [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/12/irony\\_is\\_good](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/12/irony_is_good).

33. Anthony Kuhn, “In Changing China, Being ‘Suicided’ or ‘Harmonized,’” *All Things Considered*, NPR, March 19, 2010, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124913011](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124913011).

34. Charles Custer, “Sina Blocks Weibo Accounts in Wake of Ai Weiwei’s Fundraising Campaign,” *Tech in Asia*, November 7, 2011, [www.penn-olson.com/2011/11/07/sina-blocks-weibo-accounts-in-wake-of-ai-weiweis-fundraising-campaign](http://www.penn-olson.com/2011/11/07/sina-blocks-weibo-accounts-in-wake-of-ai-weiweis-fundraising-campaign).

Who owns the Internet, and who has the right to control what content is available on it? Is it sovereign territory, or is it free from antiquated earthbound laws? These questions have engaged Internet activists and scholars for over a decade, though to the disappointment of techno-utopians, it turns out that the Internet is very much capable of being regulated, and many governments—even ones in the free Western world who champion free speech and democracy (see Internet monitoring, page 62)—have been perfectly willing to do so.<sup>35</sup> China's "Great Firewall" and "Golden Shield," a vast network of technical controls by which it regulates Internet content, is only the most obvious and extensive. In 2000, Bill Clinton compared censoring the Internet to nailing Jell-O to a wall. But ten years later, China appears to have built an effective harness—self-censorship by companies and netizens (Internet citizens)—to go along with the world's biggest nail gun: tens of thousands of state-employed Internet censors, total government control of overseas Internet data connections, and next-generation monitoring hardware to keep that Jell-O from reaching the floor.

China's ability to censor the Internet extends far beyond being able to flip a "killswitch" as the government did in Xinjiang and turning the Internet off altogether. The way the Chinese government censors the Internet includes technical, behind-the-scenes methods such as bandwidth throttling and keyword filtering, in addition to more overt intervention, including the wholesale blocking of access to websites including Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook.<sup>36</sup> As illustrated by this book, a more subtle method of censorship is to compel Internet companies in China to remove offensive content from their sites and to prevent people from finding and sharing such material in the first place.

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35. For more about how countries around the world are dealing with issues of Internet regulation, read Rebecca MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

36. For two easy-to-read overviews of the various technical ways China censors the Internet: James Fallows, "'The Connection Has Been Reset,'" *The Atlantic*, March 2008, [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/03/-the-connection-has-been-reset/306650](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/03/-the-connection-has-been-reset/306650); Dinah Gardner, "The Mechanics of China's Internet Censorship," *Uncut, Index on Censorship*, August 9, 2012, [uncut.indexoncensorship.org/2012/08/china-internet-censorship](http://uncut.indexoncensorship.org/2012/08/china-internet-censorship).

Like all major licensed websites in China, Weibo has numerous restrictions on what sort of content it is allowed to host and distribute. In June 2010, China's State Council Information Office released a white paper on Internet usage for the country. Though the paper asserts that Chinese users have the right to freedom of expression online, it also enumerates a prohibition against content that is

endangering state security, divulging state secrets, subverting state power and jeopardizing national unification; damaging state honor and interests; instigating ethnic hatred or discrimination and jeopardizing ethnic unity; jeopardizing state religious policy, propagating heretical or superstitious ideas; spreading rumors, disrupting social order and stability; disseminating obscenity, pornography, gambling, violence, brutality and terror or abetting crime; humiliating or slandering others, trespassing on the lawful rights and interests of others; and other contents forbidden by laws and administrative regulations.<sup>37</sup>

This is a broad array of off-limit topics, and the fact that a phrase such as “damaging state honor and interests” is not clearly defined is an intentional feature of the Chinese censorship system, a mechanism dubbed by Perry Link “the anaconda in the chandelier”<sup>38</sup>—everyone is aware that it is there, haunting the room, but no one is certain when and why it might strike. Furthermore, Berkeley professor Rachel E. Stern notes that the decentralized nature of the Chinese government means that any number of officials at various levels might take offense at a single controversial post. Thus, there is no single judge of what is allowed or not—instead disparate actors sometimes send out “mixed signals” about what

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37. “Protecting Internet Security—Govt. White Papers,” China.org.cn, accessed December 17, 2012, [china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2010-06/08/content\\_20207978.htm](http://china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2010-06/08/content_20207978.htm).

38. Perry Link, “The Anaconda in the Chandelier: Censorship in China Today,” US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, originally presented at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, October 24, 2001, [www.uscc.gov/research/papers/2000\\_2003/reports/link.htm](http://www.uscc.gov/research/papers/2000_2003/reports/link.htm).

is acceptable, leaving it up to the content provider to interpret and decide.<sup>39</sup> This vagueness inevitably leads content providers including Sina Weibo to self-censor excessively in order to stay well within the bounds of acceptable discourse. The company and its users may have a sort of sixth sense for knowing what may or may not be off-limits, but the fact that there is no officially published blacklist from the government, coupled with the fear of punishments (including closure of the site), compels them to step even further back from the imaginary line. As Internet scholar Rebecca MacKinnon noted:

Recent academic research on global Internet censorship has found that in countries where heavy legal liability is imposed on companies, employees tasked with day-to-day censorship jobs have a strong incentive to play it safe and over-censor—even in the case of content whose legality might stand a good chance of holding up in a court of law. Why invite legal hassle when you can just hit “delete”?<sup>40</sup>

Chinese Internet companies are now required to sign the “Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for China Internet Industry,” a document with even stricter rules than those listed in the 2010 white paper.<sup>41</sup> So it’s no wonder there are companies blocking keywords like “Islam,” even though the religion is officially sanctioned under Chinese law.

Chinese government officials send weekly updates to media providers on topics expected to be censored.<sup>42</sup> Otherwise, however, the onus is on the content provider to self-censor, a practice that

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39. Rachel E. Stern and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Politics at the Boundary: Mixed Signals and the Chinese State,” *Modern China*, September 15, 2011, [mcx.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/09/14/0097700411421463](http://mcx.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/09/14/0097700411421463).

40. Rebecca MacKinnon, “Stop the Great Firewall of America,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/11/16/opinion/firewall-law-could-infringe-on-free-speech.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/16/opinion/firewall-law-could-infringe-on-free-speech.html).

41. “Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for China Internet Industry,” Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor, accessed December 17, 2012, [www.article23.org.hk/english/research/pledgeinternet.RTF](http://www.article23.org.hk/english/research/pledgeinternet.RTF).

42. “What Chinese Censors Don’t Want You to Know,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/03/22/world/asia/22banned.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/22/world/asia/22banned.html).

Weibo's head editor admitted is "a very big headache,"<sup>43</sup> and during the Southern Weekend censorship controversy (see constitutional court, page 56) even caused one Sina censor to publicly complain, "We were under a lot of pressure. We tried to resist and let the [anti-censorship] messages spread . . . [but] then we got the order from [the Propaganda Department] and we had to delete it. . . . This is a battle."<sup>44</sup> Thus, there are multiple layers of censorship occurring. There is the government-mandated blacklist of off-limit topics<sup>45</sup>—what we'd typically consider censorship—as well as two more subtle forms: the enforced self-censorship by content providers, who must make judgment calls on what needs to be censored in order to stay in the government's good graces; and self-censorship by users, who face the threat of being detained and punished for perceived antigovernment posts (see Internet monitoring, page 62; and Liu Di, page 97). Users are at greater risk than ever now that Weibo and other microblogs request real names in order to register.<sup>46</sup> Though the company and the government claim that this is merely to hold users accountable for spreading misinformation and malicious rumors, it seems clear that such a measure is designed to head off the type of political commentary that could lead to an online-inspired Jasmine Revolution.

China has opened up considerably during its transition from the depths of the Cultural Revolution to where it is today, but vestiges of a level of government control unthinkable in other societies remain prominent features of Chinese life. On the morning of November 8,

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43. Elaine Chow, "Quote of the Day: Chen Tong, Head Editor of Sina, on the Annoyance of Censoring Tweets," Shanghaiist, June 14, 2010, [shanghaiist.com/2010/06/14/quote\\_of\\_the\\_day\\_chen\\_tong\\_head\\_edi.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2010/06/14/quote_of_the_day_chen_tong_head_edi.php).

44. Oiwan Lam, "China: Sina Weibo Manager Discloses Internal Censorship Practices," *Global Voices Advocacy*, January 7, 2013, [advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2013/01/07/china-sina-weibo-manager-discloses-internal-censorship-practices](http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2013/01/07/china-sina-weibo-manager-discloses-internal-censorship-practices).

45. These censorship instructions to publishers, broadcasters, and media companies have occasionally been leaked and are cataloged by *China Digital Times*: "Directives from the Ministry of Truth," *China Digital Times*, [chinadigitaltimes.net/china/directives-from-the-ministry-of-truth](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/directives-from-the-ministry-of-truth).

46. Tania Branigan, "China to Expand Real-Name Registration of Microbloggers," *The Guardian*, January 18, 2012, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/18/china-real-name-registration-microblogging](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/18/china-real-name-registration-microblogging).

2012, less than twenty-four hours after a majority of 125 million Americans voted to give Barack Obama a second term, two thousand delegates of the Chinese Communist Party, along with a number of special attendees, including former head of state Jiang Zemin, filed into Beijing's Great Hall of the People for the CCP's 18th National Congress. They were there to elect<sup>47</sup> the slate of politicians who would be charged with leading China's national government for the next five years; a week later, the political lineups were carefully unveiled to the media as well as to China's 1.3 billion citizens. The process was a piece of highly choreographed and familiar stagecraft, with the new top leader, Xi Jinping, leading his fellow Politburo Standing Committee colleagues onto the stage and China's state television blaring the names of those newly elected in wall-to-wall Party Congress coverage.

However, events leading up to that choreographed "election" were anything but orderly and predictable. The Chinese economy shows signs of slowing down due to continued global financial stress and bad domestic bank loans, with rising inequality causing unrest. China was the villain in a pair of international-headline-grabbing human rights stories in back-to-back years: first for disappearing the notorious Chinese artist Ai Weiwei in 2011, and then for inadvertently letting the blind activist-lawyer Chen Guangcheng escape

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47. Or "rubber-stamp" if one is a bit more cynical. The delegates who elect the 25-member Politburo do indeed hold elections, but the number of candidates is always the same as the number of positions to be filled, making the process a mere formality. (A delegate can choose to leave the ballot blank for certain individuals as a form of disapproval of that candidate, but this has no bearing on the outcome outside of marring the candidate's ability to claim unanimous approval.) However, some results are left more open to chance. For example, in choosing the 204-member Central Committee, delegates are given more than 204 candidates to select from, and there have been cases of Party favorites who didn't in the end get elected to the Central Committee. But the process certainly isn't democratic: the slate of candidates that the delegates choose from for the Central Committee has been heavily scrutinized beforehand to ensure that only candidates acceptable to the Party are capable of being selected. Trying to guess whether a candidate didn't get elected to the Central Committee because the Party did not put his name up for election on the slate or because he was voted down is a fun parlor game to play with China watchers who follow Beijing politics.



from house arrest to the United States in 2012. Other high-profile controversies included the burial of train cars when survivors were still to be found after the high-speed-rail crash in Wenzhou in July 2011, which in turn was dwarfed by the mother of all scandals in March 2012: the Bo Xilao affair, in which the government official in charge of Chongqing, one of China's largest cities, was sacked due to accusations of corruption, among other improprieties (see page 118).

Throughout it all, Weibo users commented, laughed, and railed against the system, despite the government's and Sina's best efforts to prevent discussion of such matters. As for what this portends for the future, nothing is certain, but the sharing of real-time information in China online—be it through Weibo or through another service, if Weibo is ultimately shut down—is undoubtedly here to stay. The cat-and-mouse game will continue, but Internet users are clever, and with ever-growing information about how companies and governments censor content online, the mice will be harder to catch and silence.